

Great Horned Owl

Description:

The great horned owl is the largest North American owl with ear tufts. Its large size and feathered ear tufts or "horns" make it hard to mistake. The first scientific specimen of a great horned owl was collected in the Virginia colonies so its species name is from the Latin name for this colony.

A Bird With Horns!

If you don't see the 'horns' on this owl first, you might notice the great horned owl has large yellow eyes with black pupils and a slate black bill. Its face is reddish-brown with a dark outlining of whiter feathers. These feathers form a V around a dark rust to brown feathered facial disk. The body plumage is dark and/or grayish brown with horizontal barring enabling it to blend in with dark backgrounds. The throat has a conspicuous white patch that contrasts with the rest of the plumage. The darker chest feathers make the white feathers stand out around the neck similar to a collar.

The most distinctive feature of this owl is ear tufts made completely of feathers which stand up straight and sit far apart on its head. Great horned owls may use these ear tufts to convey fear, anger or interest, similar to the way dogs use their ears. When owls are irritated, the tufts lie flat and when they are inquisitive, the ears stand upright. These feathered ear tufts also help to camouflage the bird as it roosts during the day.

A Hoot

A great horned owl is often called a "hoot" owl for good reason. Their loud deep hooting calls carry over long distances and sound like "whooh! whooh-whooh-whooh! whooh! whooh!" When nesting pairs of great horned owls call, the female has the higher pitched voice.

Similar Look, Different Sizes

The great horned owl is the second largest owl in North America. Both snowy and great grey owls are larger in size, but only the snowy is more massive (greater average body weight). The larger size, bulky shape and white chest of the great horned owl help differentiate it from the similarly colored long-eared owl. Long-eared owls appear taller and slimmer to the large, 'boxy' shape of the great horned owl. Four quick field marks for the great horned owl include ear tufts, eye color, size, and the white collar.

Coughing Up Bones and Fur

Several hours after an owl has eaten, its stomach forms a pellet of all the indigestible parts of what it has eaten including fur, feathers, exoskeletons, and/or bones. The owl then 'coughs up' this pellet which is most commonly found underneath its favorite roost or perch spot. A great way for scientists and students to investigate what types of foods owls have eaten is to dissect these pellets in the lab or classroom. A great horned owl's pellets are about an inch in diameter, three to four inches long, cylindrical, solidly compacted, and light to dark gray in color.

Habitat

No other owl in North America lives in so many diverse habitats and climates. The great horned owl is found in mountain forests, desert canyons, marshes, city parks, and urban forests. If there was a preferred habitat, it would include mature deciduous forests with scattered conifers for maximum roosting coverage with adjacent open habitats for hunting.

Food Variety

The great horned owl is not a picky eater at all. It preys on a wide variety of creatures both small and large. The owl's fringed feathers allow it to silently swoop in for prey as wind passes over the wings and keep the bird's flight noiseless. To kill their prey, they pounce on it and then squeeze it with their long, sharp talons. Cottontail rabbits and mice seem to be its prominent foods, but the owls will take larger rodents and grouse, as well as insects, lizards, fish, frogs, and birds. It actually kills many other species of owls and hawks, usually hunting from high perches. On occasion, it even captures skunks.

Adaptations

Owls have an incredible sense of hearing which enables them to hunt at night. An owl's ears are on the sides of its head. One ear sits a bit higher than the other, and the openings of the ears are slightly tilted in different directions. The offset ears help the owl to hone in on sounds. The owl's facial disks are shaped like a shallow bowl and also help the owl to hear by funneling sound directly into the ear openings.

Since the eyes of a great horned owl are almost as large as a human's, they allow quite a bit of light to pass through the pupil so that the owl can see in dark conditions. To protect the eye from the brightness of day and/or foreign objects at night, owls have a third, opaque eye membrane called the nictating membrane. Can we mention the first two membranes?

The great horned owl is a nocturnal creature (hunting primarily at night and roosting by day), so their coloring and feathered ear tufts act as serious camouflage. Contrary to popular belief, owls can't turn their heads completely around. Extra vertebrae in their necks allow owls to rotate their heads 270 degrees. Because owls can't move their eyes up or down or side to side, the owl has to move its whole head to compensate for their eyes that are fixed in their sockets.

Early Nesters

Great horned owls are one of the earliest spring nesting birds. No need to waste time building a nest; they use abandoned stick nests of a hawk, heron or crow. They also nest in rock alcoves, hollows



Great Horned Owl
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No Footprint
Footprint

No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Great Horned Owl
2. **Scientific Name:** *Bubo virginianus*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: Male- 3 lbs.
Weight: Female- 4.5 lbs.
Length: 18-25 inches.
Length (tail): 7-10 inches.
Wingspan: 40-53 inches.
5. **Diet:** Rabbits, rodents, skunks, birds; also reptiles, amphibians and insects.
6. **Young:** 2-3 per year; called owlets.
7. **Lifespan:** 15-19 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**

of trees, or abandoned buildings. Generally, two to three white eggs are laid in January or February through April. Parent great horned owls are fierce defenders of their offspring and will attack any intruder near their nest, including unsuspecting hikers.